



Buddhism and the Afterlife in the Late Joseon Dynasty: *Leading Souls to the Afterlife in a Confucian Society*

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Abstract

Before we can fully appreciate how Catholicism came to be established in Korea, we need to describe the socio-religious context of the late Joseon period. It was in the later Joseon period that Joseon society became increasingly Confucianized, yet despite this transformation Buddhism maintained its authority over issues of the afterlife. Among indicators of this, the popularity of the Buddhist Pure Land tradition can be particularly noted, among others. It was within this socio-religious context that was widely grounded in Pure Land practices and its thinking that Catholicism arrived on the Korean Peninsula offering new notions of religious practices and religiosity. In the initial stages, Catholicism was noted to be uncannily similar to Buddhism. The newly arrived Catholicism followed a similar pattern of thought regarding the afterlife that had long been sketched by Buddhism. However, unique differences were perhaps the reason for the final success of Catholicism, characteristics such as monotheism and personal devotion have come to be accepted as characteristics of what it means to be a religious tradition, facets that other religions in Korea have come to adopt.

Keywords: Joseon Buddhism, Pure Land practices, afterlife, filial piety, religious adaptation, Confucianization, Catholicism

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Introduction

Issues of the afterlife have consistently and deeply concerned humankind throughout history, concerns to which religion and its specialists have provided assurances and assistance. This applies equally to premodern Joseon, when Buddhism provided rituals and assistance to deal with matters of the afterlife, a tradition by which Buddhist monks were able to maintain their significance, particularly during the deeply Confucianized periods of the 18th and 19th centuries. In fact, this period of the 18th and 19th centuries is significant since it was the context in which modern Buddhism was born and a period when Western religions such as Catholicism were established and new religions, including Donghak, were born.¹ However, there is dearth of research done on the state of Buddhism during this time and how Buddhism may have contributed to the burgeoning in Korea of Western notions of religions and religiosity.

In the Confucianized world of Joseon, the key to the afterlife was what may be referred to as *niche* religious traditions such as Buddhism and shamanism. With the arrival of Catholicism, it was precisely this desire for the afterlife that proved pivotal in winning over Joseonites to the Catholic faith. This Catholic promise of an afterlife appealed to many, even those of the higher social strata and the highly educated. In this regard, this article seeks to elucidate the cult of Buddhism that dealt with this issue, and further, to identify the religious connection between Buddhism and Catholicism that may have been a key factor in Catholicism gaining a footing in late Joseon society.²

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1. This period is perhaps one of the more interesting and fertile in the history of Joseon Buddhism. It was during the 18th century that the nectar ritual paintings (*gamno taenghwa* 甘露幀畫) were produced and it was also during this time that shrines of the Buddhist cults—mountain spirit shrines (*sansin gak*), shrines to the afterlife (*myeongbu jeon*), and Seven Star shrines (*chilseong gak*)—are known to have been established within Buddhist temple grounds. For further discussion of the nectar ritual paintings, see Jeonghui Kim (2016), and for a discussion of the establishment of Buddhist cult shrines on temple grounds, see Yongtae Kim (2019).
 2. In attempting to explain the successful establishment of Western religions such as Catholicism and Protestantism in the premodern and early modern periods, other aspects have been

When the Joseon intellectuals first encountered the Catholic teachings, they may have been unable to understand the foreign ideas had it not been for the Buddhist ideas of Pure Land and Western Paradise and notions of hell. On the one hand, as Catholicism was expanding its foundation in Korea, Joseon intellectuals, using heaven and hell as examples, understood that there was not much difference between Catholicism and Buddhism. Similar to Buddhism, Catholicism provided a convincing argument of reaching heaven and avoiding hell. However, not having adopted Confucian moral values such as filial piety into its own practice and given that Catholicism was persecuted by the state, its adoption by the Joseon society was severely limited, to say the least. However, we are aware that Catholicism and its brand of religious ideas and practices came to determine what being religious meant and how it was to be practiced. This was quite evident in the rise of the religious movements such as Eastern Learning, or Donghak, which was ironically formed in opposition to Catholicism.

Before we can fully appreciate how Catholicism came to be established in Korea, we need to describe the socio-religious context of the late Joseon period. With this in mind, I will initially examine the strengthening of Confucianization and the increased popularity of Confucian funerary rites that were adopted into Buddhist practices as a way for Buddhism to harmonize itself with the predominating ideology of the time. Next, despite this increased Confucianization, or perhaps due to it, I argue that Buddhism was able to maintain its authority over access to the afterlife, one of its long-traditional roles. In particular, I will discuss the popularity of the Pure Land tradition, among others, which stands out as a unique facet of Buddhism and integral to its tradition during the Joseon period, but which later was perceived as being a religious aspect it shared with Catholicism.

Lastly, I suggest that once arriving in Korea, Catholicism maintained a sustained interest and need to provide afterlife services that had long been the domain of Buddhism. As we will see, Catholicism was at times mistaken

explored, such as pre-existing notions of monotheism in Korea or the socio-economic conditions, but the possible role of Buddhism has not been examined. See for example, David Chung (2001) and Donald L. Baker (2016).

for Buddhism, an indication that Catholicism was successful in addressing the issue of providing a path to the afterlife. However, I will end the article discussing some characteristics once unique to Catholicism but which have come to be accepted as germane to religious traditions in general in Korea.

Leading Souls to the Afterlife and the Confucianization of Buddhism

It was after the 17th century that the Confucian familial ordinance system³ became firmly established, wherein patrilineal descent and agnatic kinship relationships became predominant. The practice of filial piety, especially through memorial rituals, became established through Confucian rituals as espoused by Zhu Xi (1130–1200). However, relieving anxieties and fears about the afterlife and giving comfort and hope to the living was not so easily done through Confucian rituals. It is obvious that Confucianism was a system of thought that mainly dealt with matters of family, societal ethics, and socio-political order.⁴

Thus, it was through Buddhist cults and shamanism that one's anxieties and longings were soothed and comforted.⁵ It was invariably the Buddhist cults of the afterlife, such as that of the Western Paradise, that attracted patrons to visit temples for their services. This was precisely what sustained Buddhism through the Joseon period, a period generally represented by the state policy of *suppressing heterodoxy* (*byeok idan* 闢異端). For instance, the

3. The familial ordinance system is the structuring of the extended family and familial lineage based firmly on the agnatic line. By this, family inheritance and power are focused on the eldest son of the extended family. It was following the Imjin Wars (1592–1598) that a focus on exclusive patrilineal descent and the memorialization of the clan ancestors took on great prominence. For more on this, see Go (1995, 142–169).

4. Fundamentally, Confucianism did not acknowledge the enduring existence of spirits, thereby limiting the channel for emotional recourse by living descendants. In Confucianism it is explained that *gi* 氣 (energy or life force) and the spirits of the dead, *honbaek* 魂魄, simply disperse and disappear at death.

5. Of course, comforting the people on matters of the afterlife has not been the role solely of Buddhism, but also of shamanism, which deserves another full-length paper. For further discussion, see S. Kim (2018).

cult of Western Paradise was popular across a wide range of social strata, from the royal family down to commoners. It is undeniable that Buddhism maintained its prominent role as a vehicle for salvation for various social classes up to very end of the Joseon dynasty.

An important factor in the continued popularity of Buddhism is that the virtue of filial piety was a significant element of Buddhist cults of the afterlife.⁶ It was an inherent part in the cults of Jijang 地藏 bodhisattva (Kṣitigarbha in Sanskrit) and the Ten Kings (*siwang* 十王), and was incorporated into such Buddhist ritual assemblies as the Forty-nine Days Commemoration Rituals (*sasipgujae* 四十九齋) for seeking postmortem merit for deceased parents. Furthermore, the cult of reciting the name of Amitābha Buddha to be reborn in the Western Paradise was representative of what Buddhism offered—an expedient path for the soul to a desired destination. Such methods can be employed by a filial son or a daughter to ease the tribulations of their loved parents in the afterlife.

To be more specific, in terms of popularity, though the cult of Pure Land was popular, the most representative Buddhist cults of the afterlife during the Joseon period were the cult of the Ten Kings and the cult of Jijang bodhisattva (Y. Kim 2010, 97). The Ten Kings cult was perhaps the most popular, for the ten kings were the judges in the afterlife who passed judgement and decided the punishment for the souls of the dead.⁷

6. The issue of filial piety was an important Buddhist matter during the early period of Buddhism in India and during its development in China. For instance, Xing (2013) examines the development of this issue in the early period of Buddhism based on the Nikāyas and the Vinayas of early Buddhist schools and compares them to Chinese developments. This matter has been no less important in Korean Buddhism, where the *Bulseol daebo bumō eunjung gyeong* 佛說大報父母恩重經 (Scripture in Which Buddha Speaks about the Deep Indebtedness to One's Father and Mother) is known to have been transmitted to Korea in the 9th century. The oldest extent copy of this sutra in Korea is dated to the late 14th century. For more on filial piety and Buddhism in Korea, see Won (2009).

7. The soul meets the Ten Kings in order over a set period of days. Judgement occurs every seventh day, up until the forty-ninth day, and following this after one hundred days, one year, and with last judgement occurring after three years. For further information, see S. Kim (2018, especially endnote 22).

In China, the concept of the Ten Kings became fully developed in the ninth-century apocryphon, *Scripture in Which Buddha Speaks about the Judgement of the Ten Kings for Rebirth After Seven Days* (*Foshuo yuxiu shiwang shengqi jing* 佛說預修十王生七經, hereafter *Sutra of the Ten Kings*).⁸ Characteristics of the office of the Ten Kings is the bureaucratic process whereby the souls are judged in a judicial-like system before the Ten Kings and their assistants, all dressed in court attire.⁹

In the case of Korea, it was in the 10th century, during the Goryeo period, that temples were established wherein the worship of the Ten Kings was prominent. This indicates that the cult of the Ten Kings was accepted relatively early in the history of Korean Buddhism and enjoyed general popularity. With the start of the Joseon period, it became widespread among the masses and particularly so in the latter period of Joseon, as evidenced by ritual manuals for the performance of the cult of the Ten Kings, such as the *Siwang gakcheong* 十王各請 and the *Siwang beonsik* 十王幡式. These were published in the 19th century as a collection of ritual manuals titled *Jakbeop gwigam* 作法龜鑑 (Paragon Rules of Behavior).¹⁰ Especially the Forty-nine Days Commemoration Rituals (*chilchiljae* 七七齋), performed for the fortunes of deceased loved ones, including parents, came to be widespread. Their popularity is confirmed by the fact that the names of some of these kings were commonly known among the people, such as Great King Yeomna (Yeomna daewang 閻羅大王), the fifth king.

Another popular cult during the Joseon period was of Jijang bodhisattva. Through this cult practice, assistance was given to the dead soul as it migrated through the six destinies (*yukdo* 六道). In particular, it was believed that Jijang bodhisattva would save the souls of sentient beings who had already fallen into the caverns of hell. It follows that in spite of the

8. An authoritative book on this apocryphon is that of Stephen F. Teiser (1994). For further discussion on this apocryphon, see also Sørensen (2013). For a thorough consideration of the development of the cult of the Ten Kings in Korean History, see Jeonghui Kim (1996).

9. Daoist elements were adopted in the formation of the Sinicized conceptualization of hell. For further discussion, see Jeonghui Kim (1996, 22–32).

10. See HBJ 10.591, 10.604–606. *Jakbeop gwigam* was composed by Geungseon 亘璇 (1767–1852), also known as Baekpa 白坡.

laws of karmic retribution, it was believed that if the transmigrating soul repented earnestly to Jijang bodhisattva, the soul might be able to receive special privilege to pass expediently through the stages of judgement and retribution (HBJ 10.557–558). This cult of Jijang bodhisattva was well described in the *Jijang gyeong* 地藏經 (*Kṣitigarbha-sūtra*), also published in the aforementioned *Jakbeop gwigam*.

During the Joseon period, with its oppressive anti-Buddhist state policies and far-reaching Confucianization, the Buddhist cults and their ritual assemblies, performed also at the state level, were prohibited. Although these rituals were replaced with Confucian ones, Buddhist rituals persisted mostly in the arena of everyday life.¹¹ For instance, the Joseon royal family maintained Buddhist cultic practices, in many cases by means of providing designated votive temples special favor and support.¹²

In addition to comforting the emotions of its patrons, Buddhist rituals came to adopt Confucian elements to remain relevant in a Confucianized society. Indeed, Confucian funerary and ancestor memorial rites had an impact on the ritual practices of Buddhism, where Buddhist concepts and rituals were adapted to the ideas on death and the afterlife that were current at that time. For instance, the 18th-century monk Mugam Choenu 默庵最訥 (1717–1790) claimed that evil numen influenced the living by causing sickness. His ideas on the afterlife even led him to accept the existence of the soul of the Buddha and of the patriarchs.¹³ Inak Uicheom 仁嶽義沾 (1746–1796) similarly asserted the existence of spirits in the afterlife by arguing that the heavenly realm and other forms of the afterlife existed although though they could not be seen (HBJ 10.416–417).

It is quite obvious that while the discourse on the afterlife and its existence may have become a popular issue, the prominence of the

11. Here, I am critical of modern notions of religious affairs as a private matter and Jürgen Habermas' conceptualization of public and private spheres and its use to represent premodern East Asian concepts of *gong* 公 and *sa* 私. This incompatibility is well described by Y. Kim (2019, 301–302).

12. On the support of Buddhism by Joseon monarchs, see Tak (2012) and Pu (2011).

13. Choenu claimed the existence of mountain and river spirits while also bringing ghosts into the discussion. See HBJ 10.19–20.

Confucian worldview and its moral virtues clearly became incorporated into Buddhist thinking on the afterlife. In the case of the prominent late-Joseon monk, Yeondam Yuil 蓮潭有一 (1720–1799), he argued it was a mistake to deny the existence of the Pure Lands, while at the same time supporting ideas on the Buddhist afterlife using notions of Confucian virtues. He argued,

[T]hose whose hearts are full of loyalty, filial piety, humanity, righteousness, justice, and compassion are able to be reborn in the Pure Land, and not only those who practice Buddha recitation. Also, if a heavenly realm exists, it is the benevolent noble person who will go there, and if hell exists, it is the petty person who is evil not being loyal or filial who will go there. Therefore, one must repent one's evil actions and reveal one's true and original nature.¹⁴

There was furthermore a transformation in Pure Land ideas on how to gain salvation. For example, one of the exemplar claims had been that even an evil person might be saved through the practice of “calling the name and being mindful of Amitābha” (*chingmyeong yeombul* 稱名念佛), established based on the ideas of Shandao 善導 (613–681), a seventh-century Tang monk and the third patriarch of the Chinese Pure Land sect. However, this was not the basis upon which a person was saved in the late Joseon period. By the late Joseon period it came to be that among the core criteria for being reborn in the Pure Land were benevolent actions that were based heavily on Confucian virtues.

Such reformulated ideas on salvation were in circulation during the late Joseon, and even the Confucian scholar Yi Gyu-gyeong 李圭景 (1788–1856) in his encyclopedic compendium affirmed that,

14. HBJ 10.280–283. Even in the Joseon period apocryphon, *Sangbeop myeorui gyeong* 像法滅義經 (1735), the reasons for falling to hell included unfiliality and disloyalty. The notion that “the noble person will surely go to the heavenly realm and petty person will surely fall to hell” appeared early on in the “Lixuan jiaozi you qing pu shuo” 李宣教子由請普說 by the Song period Linji monk Dahui Zonggao 大慧宗杲 (1089–1163).

[I]f indeed the heavenly realm and hell exist then the noble person will surely go to the heavenly realm and the petty person will surely fall to hell. It is because there exist explanations of hell that people are able to correct their mistakes and enact benevolence.¹⁵

Here, while Buddhist explanations of the heavenly realm and hell were used to encourage benevolent acts, the preconditions for salvation were espoused to be actions that combined both Buddhist notions of karmically fortuitous action and Confucian moral virtues. This adoption of Confucian morality into Buddhist soteriology is a reflection of the socio-religious amalgamation that came to be established as a way for Buddhism to maintain its religious relevance in a Confucianizing Joseon society.

Changes in Buddhist Soteriology in the Late Joseon Period

The 18th and 19th centuries were critical in the transformation of Joseon Buddhism. As mentioned above, it was during this time that the nectar ritual paintings emerged and various Buddhist cults such as the cult of the mountain spirit and the Myeongbu shrine came to be established permanently within Buddhist temples. Other than the adoption of Confucian virtues into Buddhist cultic practices as described above, there were other distinct and noticeable transformations that took place in the latter Joseon period. These changes are characteristically regarding the issues of the afterlife and I surmise that the matter of the afterlife took on more significance in the overall Buddhist soteriology at the time. An obvious transformation was the architectural establishment at many temples of the Jijang shrine, Ten Kings shrine, and Myeongbu shrine, all of which were related to matters of hell and the afterlife. The statues of the Jijang bodhisattva and the Ten Kings together with the paintings of their images were placed in these shrines. Here, prayers were offered entreating the

15. *Oju yeonmun jangjeonsango* (Scattered Manuscripts of Glosses and Comments of Oju), vol. 20, “Jiok byeonjeung seol.”

Buddha for comfort in the afterlife and for a soul's passage to a better place.

Together with the establishment of these shrines, the two sutras that provided the scriptural basis for the cult of the Ten Kings and Jijang, the Sutra of the Ten Kings (*Siwang gyeong* 十王經)¹⁶ and *Sutra on the Past Vows of Kṣitigarbha Bodhisattva* (*Jijang bosal bonwon gyeong* 地藏菩薩本願經), respectively, came to be published and translated into vernacular Korean in the late Joseon period, an indication that these texts were popularly used. In a similar manner, the developments of shrines as places for ritual practice and the concurrent publication of ritual manuals to support these cultic practices of the afterlife point to Buddhist soteriological changes characterized by growing socio-religious needs and awareness regarding issues of the afterlife.¹⁷

This widening popularization of issues of the afterlife as matters for Buddhism is corroborated by evidence from the everyday socio-cultural sphere. For instance the increased popularization of the Buddhist cult of hell and the afterlife extended to cultural developments. Among the 57 Buddhist songs dating to the late Joseon period that deal directly with the topic of Buddhist hell, sixteen were written in vernacular Korean, including the “Songs of Conversion” (Hoesimgok 回心曲) and the “Song of Encouraging Rebirth” (Gwonwangga 勸往歌). Also, among nineteenth-century novels, there were five written in the Korean script, *hangeul*, including *Jeoseung jeon*, that describe reasons for a person ending up in hell. All the more interesting was that these five novels emphasized keeping the everyday rules of morality similar to the Confucian *five relationships* (*oryun* 五倫) as a requirement to avoid hell.¹⁸

Other supporting indications of the popularization of the afterlife are mantras and *dhāraṇī* associated with esoteric Buddhism that were

16. This is a common name used for both the *Foshuo yuxiu shiwang shengqi jing* 佛說預修十王生七經 and the *Dizangpusa faxin yinyuan shiwang jing* 地藏菩薩發心因緣十王經.

17. In particular, Nam highlights how late Joseon Buddhism was characterized by a conspicuous increase in the publication of *dhāraṇī* sutras (陀羅尼經), mantra collections (*jineon jip* 真言集), and Buddhist ritual manuscripts (Nam 2012, 10–14).

18. In his study, Ki Jong Kim (2016) explores the various literary works during the late Joseon period that dealt with the theme of hell.

transliterated phonetically into the Korean script, *hangeul*. In ritual manuals such as *Compilations of the Hidden Teachings* (*Pimilgyo jip* 秘密教集), published in 1784, the original Sanskrit mantras are transliterated into both the Chinese script and vernacular Korean so that even non-specialists were able to recite them. Furthermore, many late Joseon-period wood-block carvings of the mantra and *dhāraṇī* compilations containing instructions on performing incantation rituals were published in the late Joseon period. The interesting point here is that we find that most of these carvings were published using donations made by sponsors who wished to pray for the postmortem merits of their deceased parents.¹⁹ As mantras and *dhāraṇī* are specifically for ritual use, we can gather the increased importance of ritual performance together with concerns for the wellbeing of souls in the afterlife in the soteriological concerns of late Joseon Buddhism.

However, these Buddhist concerns regarding the afterlife were meant not only to satisfy the rising period concerns regarding the afterlife, but to also to specifically fit the popularly accepted morality of Neo-Confucianism. All indications are that Confucian morality was actively accepted by even Buddhist monastics. This is clearly evidenced by the many cases of monks who in the late Joseon kept their parents' funerary tablets and performed memorial rituals for their parents.²⁰ For example, a nineteenth-century monk, Baekpa Geungseon 白坡巨璇 (1767–1852), after reading Buddhist sutras at an early age, came to the conclusion that the practice of true filial piety was to pray for one's whole family, including one's relatives, to be reborn in Pure Land. It was with this determination that Geungseon sought to become a monk. He is known to have even sought the assistance of a well-known Confucian literatus in order to have published the *Songgye hyohaeng nok* 松溪孝行錄 (Records of the Filial Actions of Songgye), which extolled the filial virtues of his consanguinal forefathers (HBJ 10.651–653; Takahashi 1929, 805–810).

19. Hee-sook Nam (2004) was one of the first to explore the surprisingly active publication of Buddhist texts during the Joseon period.

20. As an example, a nineteenth-century monk, Hwadam Gyeonghwa, was discussed (Kwon 1917, 234).

This pattern of using Buddhism to perform what were identified originally as Confucian virtues is also easily found among the Joseon kings. It is well known that Jeongjo 正祖 (r. 1776–1800) had Yongju Temple 龍珠寺 built as a votive temple for the repose of the soul of his father Sado Seja 思悼世子 (1735–1762) in 1790.²¹ In his act of filial piety, Jeongjo had to rely on Buddhism to allay the spirit of his father who had suffered a gruesome death. In the statement of commemoration of the construction of the votive temple, Jeongjo explained his desire to repay for the grace of his parents and to pray for their postmortem fortune with merits earned from the building of Yongju Temple.

The expression of filial piety was extended to the act of publishing copies of the *Sutra on Deep Indebtedness to One's Father and Mother* (*Fumu enzhong jing* 父母恩重經) at Yongju Temple and having it widely distributed (Y. Kim 2010, 101–102). Such cultural products are an indication of the socio-religious changes that took place in the latter half of the Joseon period that indicate both the general adoption of Confucian moral virtues and increasing concerns with the afterlife. These concerns developed in various ways, one being a wider adoption of Pure Land cult practices by monastics, as we will discuss next.

The Pure Land Cult and Its Importance in Buddhist Practice

The teachings of the Buddhist paradise, or the Pure Lands, also played a central role in the Buddhist cults of the late Joseon period. Though the importance of the Pure Lands as part of popular practices has been recognized, it has also become incorporated as an essential part of meditational practice in Joseon monasticism.²² Interestingly, however,

21. This does not seem to have been a private affair but more of a public event in that the royal family and the Joseon Board of Taxation (Hojo 戶曹), as well as many regional magistrates and regional temples, donated generously to the construction of Yongju Temple.

22. If by the powers of Amitābha's vows a person repents for their evil deeds, chants homage to Amitābha Buddha, and prays to be reborn in the Pure Land, it is claimed that person is able to be reborn in the Pure Land. As with elsewhere in East Asia, these ideas found rapid acceptance

it was in the 17th century that the practice of recitation of the Buddha's name became systemized in combination with cultivational practices. This amalgamation is known as the Three Paths (*sammun* 三門) of cultivation, comprising 1) Path of Direct Cutting (*gyeongjeol mun* 徑截門), that is, meditation; 2) Complete and Immediate Path (*wondon mun* 圓頓門), that is, doctrinal study; and 3) Path of Buddha Recitation (*yeombul mun* 念佛門), that is, recitation of the name of Amitābha Buddha. In the systemization of the practice of reciting the name of Amitābha Buddha, there were two accepted convictions: "one's own mind is the Pure Land" (*jasim jeongto* 自心淨土) and "the original nature of one's mind is Amitābha Buddha" (*jaseongmita* 自性彌陀). These notions provided the foundation for two basic forms of Buddha recitation practices. The first was the *self-power* or self-reliant chanting of Amitābha Buddha Seon 念佛禪 and the second was the *other-power* Buddha recitation practice that depended on the salvational powers of Amitābha Buddha. In other words, the path of recitation of Amitābha Buddha included both a self-focused cultivational aspect and an other-dependent devotional cultic practice.²³

Cheonggeo Hyujeong 淸虛休靜 (1520–1604), an eminent Joseon monk who first espoused the path of Buddha recitation within the Three Paths of cultivation, claimed that "Seon meditation and chanting are in essence the same given that (through both methods) the mind is cultivated and awakened." Part of this claim was Hyujeong's argument that cultivational aspects were inherent in the practice of chanting Seon (HBJ 7.650–651). In tandem with such cultivational practices, Hyujeong equally valued the other-power practices. In his devotional prayer he stated,

[I] pray that at the immanent moment [of death], the karmas of evil deeds be extinguished and [that I will] be able to travel to the Western Paradise to meet Amitābha Buddha and receive assurance [of enlightenment]. For the future fruitions, [I hope to] lead sentient beings [to the Pure Land]. (HBJ 7.718)

in Joseon Korea. For more on the cult of the Pure Land, see Sueki (2006, 145–148).

23. Yongtae Kim (2015) provides a comprehensive study of the late Joseon Pure Land cult.

Hyujeong's devotion to the powers of Amitābha's vows in the salvation of sentient beings is evident. He further claims the benefits of chanting to extinguish the karmas of evil deeds regardless of the spiritual capacity of the person. While Hyujeong accepted the differences in the capacities of the people he argues that the spiritual benefits of recitation of the Buddha's name and also the benefits of the cultic practices of Pure Land Buddhism.²⁴ The issues surrounding the path of Buddha recitation as an expedient means was an important one for Hyujeong and one that had significant implications in the salvation of not only the monastics but also the non-monastics. In his magnum opus, *Seonga gwigam* 禪家龜鑑 (1564), Hyujeong noted that,

[I]n principle, there is no other method than directly pointing to the original mind. However, in terms of expedient means, Western Paradise exists in reality, and also in Amitābha's forty-eight vows. A person chanting the name of the Buddha, on account of the powers of Amitābha's vows, will be reborn in the Pure Land and instantly be free from *samsāra*. (HBJ 7.640)

Furthermore, Hyujeong extols the simpler method of other-power practices for salvation in comparison to the self-power methods. As he explains,

[S]elf-power cultivation is to plant a tree to build a boat but the other-power cultic practice is to depend on the power of Amitābha's vows, [which means to] borrow a boat to directly cross the ocean. (HBJ 7.640)

Hyujeong accepted the cult of chanting the name of Amitābha Buddha to be the easier and more expedient path. Hyujeong's intent was to not limit practice to that of chanting Seon, which was deemed overly centered on the practitioner. Pure Land practices, on the other hand, were made easily accessible by leaving open the cultic practice of Buddha recitation for all, including the common people.

24. Hyujeong fully accepts the differing spiritual capacities of the people, from the laity to the meditation monks (HBJ 7.711).

An eighteenth-century figure, Giseong Kwaeseon 箕城快善 (1693–1764), had similar concerns and argued that the differing spiritual capacities of the people needed to be considered with regard to Buddhist practices. Kwaeseon felt that not all practices were equally effective for all practitioners and argued that the various distinctions of the practitioners, such as between Seon-Gyo, commoner-sage, and benevolent-evil were better suited to certain practices. Nevertheless, Kwaeseon agreed that the path of recitation of the Buddha's name did not impose limitations based on such discriminating characteristics or on the capacity of the practitioner, and therefore was a superior path (Lee 2008a, 143–176). This was illustrated in his *Yeombul hwanhyang gok* 念佛還鄉曲 (Song of Returning Home by Means of Chanting Amitābha's Name, 1767) where Kwaeseon described reaching the Pure Land metaphorically as returning to one's home. The lyric describes a journey where a person on his way back home encounters Seon and Hwaom (Huayen in Chinese), but in the end, the person arrives home chanting the name of Amitābha, signifying the perceived effectiveness of chanting Pure Land practices (HBJ 9.650–659).

The master of doctrinal leaning, Yeondam Yuil, despite his doctrinal training, emphasized the cultivational power of chanting Seon and claimed that the method of chanting was a “self-power path of meditative-concentration” (禪定自力門). Nevertheless, Yuil also perceived the importance of chanting in the salvation of common people and for this purpose formed societies for Buddha recitation (HBJ 10.261). Yuil explained that,

[E]ven though a person was evil during his life time, if that person practices the “ten recollections” (十念), that person is able to be reborn in the Pure Land. Even those who only practiced chanting for twenty or thirty years will reach the Pure Land, all the more easily. (HBJ 10.282–283)

Yuil was asserting the power and ease of salvation of the Pure Land practices of recitation of the Buddha's name. This was no different among the Joseon monastics in that Pure Land practices became an essential form of practice.

Such growth in the popularity of Pure Land practices in the late Joseon period was also reflected in other social spheres such as in the publication of Buddhist works. The number of publications of texts related to the Pure Land drastically increased during the late Joseon period. Such an increase in publications may have been related to the 1681 shipwreck near Korean shores of a Chinese ship carrying the Jiaxing 嘉興 canon.²⁵ One result of this event was that Baegam Seongchong 栢庵性聰 (1631–1700) was able to collect the texts from this vessel and compile all the Pure Land-related excerpts to be published as a compendium titled, *Precious Writings on the Pure Land* (Jeongto boseo 淨土寶書) in 1686.²⁶

It may have been on account of Baegam's compendium, but some twenty years later, in 1704, Myeongyeon 明衍 published the *Universal Encouragement for Reciting the Name of Amitābha* (*Yeombul bogwon mun* 念佛普勸文), which became highly popular and eventually went through seven more printings. This text contained accounts of those who were reborn in the Pure Land, translations into vernacular Korean of popular songs such as the aforementioned "Songs of Conversion," and other texts of procedural manuals for the recitation of the name of the Buddha. It also described that among all the Buddhas, it was paramount to chant the name of Amitābha Buddha and that amidst all the pure lands, the Pure Land of Extreme Bliss was the most outstanding and desirable (HBJ 9.44–78).

Also popular at this time were ritual manuals containing compilations of the procedural format for recitation rituals performed for leading the souls to the Pure Land or to be reborn in the land of bliss. Such manuals as the *Penance Methods for Ritual Convocations for the Worship and Recitation of Amitābha* (*Yenyeom mita doryang chambeop* 禮念彌陀道場懺法) and the *Rebirth in the Pure Land by Means of Worship and Recitation* (*Yenyeom wangsang mun* 禮念往生文) were published so frequently that in some cases a thousand copies were produced in a single printing (HBJ 9.116–117).

25. The Jiaxing Tripitaka was the largest Chinese collection of texts. Its production began during the Ming dynasty (1368–1644) in 1589 and was completed during the Qing period (1636–1912) in 1712.

26. See Lee Jong-su's work (2008b) on the impact of the Jiaxing canon on the Joseon Buddhist community.

There was also a flurry in the publication of literary compositions that extolled being reborn in the Pure Land. For instance, Buddhist song lyrics can be divided into two genres: the first type expressing yearning for rebirth in the Sukhāvati and called “Lyrics of Rebirth” (*wangsaeng gasa*), and the second that encouraged cultivating the mind through meditation and awakening to one’s self-nature, called “Lyrics of Meditation” (*chamseon gasa*).

Even in popular literature, the notion of the Pure Land was a familiar theme. Novels such as the *Tale of Sending Home the Spirit of Gentleman Wang* (*Wangnang banhon jeon* 王郎返魂傳), in which reciting the Buddha name and Pure Land were the main subject matter of the story, gained wide popularity. Also widely popular was the “Song of Encouraging Rebirth” (*Gwonwangga* 勸往歌), which introduced the ten evil actions that must be guarded against when practicing Buddha recitation and also summarized the key points for rebirth in the Pure Land (Jongjin Kim 2009, 164–212). Akin to this, communities for practicing Buddha recitation, also known as fraternities for Buddha recitation (*yeombulgye* 念佛契) or Buddha recitation assemblies (*yeombulhoe* 念佛會), came to be formed and Buddha recitation halls were built to house these activities. Even after the 19th century, it is interesting to note that Assemblies for Ten Thousand Days of Buddha Recitation (*manil yeombulhoe* 萬日念佛會), which met daily to chant the Buddha’s name for twenty-seven years, grew in popularity.²⁷

It was within this socio-religious context grounded in the Buddhist practices of Pure Land and its concepts that Catholicism arrived on the Korean Peninsula with its offers of new notions of religious practices and religiosity. A new contender appeared in what had been a realm dominated by Buddhism and interestingly, in the initial stages, Catholicism was noted to be uncannily similar to Buddhism.

27. For a detailed study of late Joseon Buddhist recitation compacts, see Han (1995).

Enter Catholicism and a New Path to the Afterlife

Also known as Western Learning (*seohak* 西學), Catholicism was initially transmitted to Asia together with Western technology and scientific knowledge. Catholicism was first introduced to Korea prior to the 17th century, however, it was only in the late 18th century that it began to make inroads.²⁸ For instance, the Roman Catholic catechism was translated not only into traditional Chinese but also into *hangeul* and distributed even before 1787. Starting from 1784 the number of Korean converts began to increase dramatically and by 1801 the number had reached ten thousand. In concert with the increased converts, over 120 different prints of Catholic texts were in circulation in the early 19th century. In particular, the initial translation of *Direct Explanation of the Holy Bible* (*Shengjing zhijie* 聖經直解), a compilation of the excerpts from the four gospels of the Bible, into vernacular Korean opened the way to the propagation of the teachings of Catholicism among both the highly educated *yangban* and the masses. We also witness the development of a mature level of understanding of the Catholic doctrine attained by early Catholic converts in Joseon Korea. For instance, *Essence of Catholicism* (*Jugyo yoji* 主教要旨), a summary of the Catholic doctrine, was written in vernacular Korean in 1790 by Jeong Yak-jong 丁若鍾 (1760–1801), a Catholic martyr and older brother of the great Confucian, Jeong Yak-yong 丁若鏞 (1762–1836) (Jo 2014, 185–243).

Given the above similarities noted by Confucian intellectuals between Catholicism and Buddhism, it is arguable that Buddhist notions provided similar religious ideas through which the ideas of Catholicism might be readily discerned. When Joseon intellectuals first encountered Catholic teachings, they may not have been able to understand the foreign ideas had it not been for the Buddhist ideas and notions on the afterlife. Initial comparisons between Catholicism and Buddhism or criticisms of

28. Baker traces the beginnings of Catholicism in Korea to a meeting in 1779 of several *yangban* elite, who gathered to discuss and try new techniques for moral cultivation (Baker 2017, 59–70).

Catholicism often note the basic similarities between the two religions.²⁹

For example, in the early 17th century, after Yi Su-gwang 李睟光 (1563–1628) read Matteo Ricci's *True Principles of Catholicism* (*Tianzhu shiyi* 天主實義, 1603), Yi concluded with a harsh criticism of the Catholic notions of heaven, hell, and fortune-misfortune. Yi explained that the Catholics, in an attempt to make people believe in their teachings, used ideas of heaven, hell, and the explanations of fortune and misfortune. He commented that such notions were all baseless and that their teachings were no more than second-rate dogmas. The reactions of the Joseon Confucian scholars, reveals how Catholicism's religious ethos was discussed, an ethos that was identified by Confucian scholars with Buddhism (Takahashi 1929, 792–794).

In particular, parallels were often drawn between Buddhism and Catholicism on issues of the afterlife. For instance, on his reflection on human life, a late Joseon literatus, Kim Man-jung 金萬重 (1637–1692) came to conclude that Confucianism and Daoism were inferior to Buddhism as “Buddhism alone provided the means to reconcile oneself to the vicissitudes of life and death.” In this sense, Kim also considered Catholicism as tackling life's essential issues of the afterlife but categorized Catholicism as inferior, though in the same category as Buddhism, and even noted that they both originated in the West (Evon 2014, 192).

It was during King Jeongjo's rule (r. 1776–1800) in the late 18th century that Catholicism spread enough to attract the ire of the state. Chae Je-gong 蔡濟恭 (1720–1799) was serving as prime minister when, after having read Ricci's *True Principles of Catholicism*, he argued that Catholicism brought disorder to the world and deceived the people with its explanations of heaven and hell. In his conversation with King Jeongjo, Chae explained,

Catholicism holds up its god and the pope but disregards fathers and kings. Though it is said that they reject Buddhism, in reality they have taken the teachings of Buddhism as their own, and so this makes them a

29. Similar criticisms of Catholicism were that the religion was selfish and antisocial and that it bewitched the people with the ideas of heaven and hell (Rausch 2014, 219). See also D. Choe (1988, 67–75).

sect of Buddhism.³⁰

In this way, in the late Joseon period, Buddhist concepts such as that of the heavenly realm and hell and Buddhist notions such as corresponding retributions would have been useful to understanding Catholicism. Yet, despite the tendency to view the two in a similar light, we cannot ignore some fundamental differences.³¹ One significant difference was the degree of importance placed on the afterlife and the fervent devotion to one's faith as proof of one's salvation. Though Buddhism was a long-standing religion and worldview, the early Korean Catholics were fervent in their belief that their new faith effectively led their souls to eternal life after death.

One reason why Jeong Yak-jong remained a Catholic despite the state persecutions and eventually became a martyr was his perusal of eternal life. Hwang Sa-yeong (1775–1801), in his famous Silk Letter (*baekseo*), described how,

When he [Jeong] was young, he wanted to learn about the immortals and their techniques of prolonging life...Then he heard of Catholicism and gained new hope for eternal life. He became a sincere Catholic and put his whole body and soul into practicing it.³²

For Jeong, Catholicism, more so than Buddhism, was the means of attaining eternal life, ironically at the cost of life in this world. At the time of his execution, Jeong was sure that his faith in Catholicism would take him to Heaven and chose not to renounce his new faith.

Other differences between the two religions include the Catholic concept of the Lord of Heaven and the Buddhist idea of transmigration, and there were also Catholic practices that were irreconcilable to the Confucian worldview, such as the Catholic prohibition of performing ancestor

30. *Jeongjo sillok* (Veritable Records of King Jeongjo), 26 (1788/8/3).

31. Baker discusses some differences between Catholicism and Buddhism and traditional Korean religions, including monotheism and the notion of religion as personal faith (2017, 4–6).

32. Silk Letter, lines 36–37. Quoted in Rausch (2014, 215).

memorial rituals that led to a cascade of state persecutions.³³

Such irreconcilable differences led to the execution of one particular Catholic and the execution of hundreds more. When a yangban by the name of Yun Ji-chung 尹持忠 (1759–1791), in following the Catholic injunction against worshipping idols, failed to prepare an ancestral tablet upon his mother's death, the Joseon state enforced its ritual norms resulting in the execution of Yun in 1791.³⁴ It was inevitable that critical public sentiment directed at Catholicism as subversive to the social order would grow (Kwon 1917, 227).

Over 300 Catholics were martyred through the course of state persecutions from the late 18th through to the 19th century, the believers opting for death in the hopes of eternal life rather than renouncing their faith. To many Joseonites the Catholic road to the afterlife was compelling enough to sacrifice their earthly lives in its name. Furthermore, unlike the patrons of Buddhist temples, the Catholic converts were compelled to devote themselves to the Catholic doctrine and beliefs, even under threat of state persecution. Rather than harmonizing their new faith with Confucian virtues and its notions of ritual, Catholics held to their own unique set of doctrine and ideas of religious practice.

Such actions were a reflection of the foundational elements that were to be adopted by new religions in the coming modern era—that is, the centrality of faith, religious creed, the formation of a faith-based community, and belief in a monotheistic god.³⁵ Indeed, in the 19th century Joseon Korea experienced a combination of internal and external crisis as foreign powers advanced into Korea, in turn fueling the country's internal socio-political crisis. However, towards the late 19th century, when the wave

33. Emphasis on one's belief in one's salvation would have been a new concept and difficult to accept. The rejection of this idea is evident in a criticism that claimed, "In the existence of hell, it is a place where evil people go and so is not related to what the person believes" (Yi 2001, 342).

34. It led to the burnings of Catholic books and adoption of measures by the state that acted to placate and punish the Catholics. See Jo (1988).

35. Some of these elements came to be adopted by modern Buddhism in Korea, as evidenced by the characteristics of Won Buddhism.

of modernization swept over Joseon society, the period of Buddhism's monopoly over the afterlife came to an end. Buddhism found itself in dire competition for religious relevance with Catholic and then Protestant notions of Heaven and the heavenly kingdom.³⁶

Conclusions

Despite increased Confucianization in the latter half of the Joseon period, Buddhism ably maintained its authority. Especially by adopting core cultural virtues such as filial piety and addressing personal needs related to the afterlife, Buddhism was able to maintain its share of the ritual world in a Confucian society, even posing a challenge to Confucianism. This was because providing a way to the afterlife was generally a role adopted by Buddhism and shamanism. Ironic as it may seem, Buddhist concepts and the cult of the afterlife were ways for the Joseonites to practice filial piety towards their parents, piety that extended to caring for them in the afterlife. This was what gave Buddhism its significance, and differentiated it from Catholicism, which was less flexible and in effect in conflict with Confucian concepts of ritual and ritual practice.

The transformations in Buddhism by the adoption of core cultural virtues are interpreted as a process of Confucianization, but from a different perspective they constituted a usurpation of Confucian morality by Buddhism as a challenge to the predominance of Confucianism in the ritual realm. It is true that while Confucianism came to decline with the start of the modern period, Buddhism seems to have been able to maintain its position of religious power.

In one sense, Buddhist cultic practices of the afterlife that became deeply engrained in Korean culture were similar to those of Catholicism in the latter part of the 18th century. Previous to the late 19th century and the turbulent period of foreign encroachment upon Korea, Buddhism was

36. Even beyond the religious, the effect of Christianity in the initial steps of modernization was overwhelming to say the least. See Baker (2016).

able to maintain an upper hand in providing a path to the afterlife. However with growing modernization and the inroads made by Catholicism and Protestantism, the tables turned in favor of Western religions. Despite similarities between Buddhism and Catholicism, religious differences came to the fore, as evidenced in the history of martyrs who chose the Catholic heaven over the Buddhist Pure Lands, even at the price of their own death.

Christianity, in the form of Catholicism with Protestantism, was eventually established as a recognized religion in Korea, but it also set a standard for other religions to mimic as Korea moved into the modern era. During the premodern era Buddhism and shamanism were the predominant ways for the people to access the afterlife, but thereafter they had to share this role with Christianity. The conflict-harmony relationship between Buddhism and Catholicism in Korea, and the concrete evidence of give-and-take that existed between these two faiths, require further examination. This paper has endeavored to set forth a foundation for such a discourse.

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